



UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, NC 27711

JUL 18 1997

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Jon Hadley
202-775-5929

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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Subpart O - Ethylene Oxide Commercial Sterilization
Plant Explosions

FROM: John Seitz, Director
for OAQPS

Henry Thomas

TO: See Addressees

On June 13 and July 5 explosions occurred at two ethylene oxide plants, one in Virginia and one in Massachusetts. In addition, an explosion occurred June 24 at a facility in Indiana where one worker was killed and 69 other persons were injured. The explosion at the Indiana facility is under investigation by the Chemical Accident Investigation Team of the Chemical Emergency Preparedness and Prevention Office (CEPPO) in conjunction with Region 5 and the State Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Apparently, these facilities are not the only ones which have had explosions since promulgation of Subpart O on December 6, 1994. While the causes of these explosions are not yet precisely known, these facilities were using combustion control units to control emissions. It is possible these units could be a factor in these incidents. We alerted the Regional Air Toxic Coordinators on July 16 of this situation.

I recommend the following immediate course of action. Regional Offices/States should inform all ethylene oxide facilities of the recent incidents and the potential safety problem. If possible, they should compile the type of control units plants are using or installing to comply with the standards and let us know as soon as possible. As part of this communication, we recommend you inform the facilities that if they have a safety concern they may disconnect the control units immediately in the short term. Compliance with Subpart O is not required until December 8, 1997. In the meantime, we will develop options to ensure that facilities will not be required to operate combustion control units until EPA can determine that it is safe to do so; such options could include modifying the compliance date, if necessary. I do not want the Subpart O December 8, 1997 compliance date potentially compromising safety.

We will work with all stakeholders to share information about the causes of these incidents, to resolve safety concerns and to enable the plants to ultimately comply with the requirements of the standards. Industry representatives will provide, within the next few days, a list of facilities which have had explosions or difficulties operating new controls systems. I'll forward this information to you as soon as we receive it. If you have any questions regarding the emissions requirements please call David Markwordt, at 919-541-0837. If you have any questions about the accident investigations, please call Craig Matthiessen at 202-260-9781.

JUL 22 '97 02:34PM EGD OAGPS

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Addressees:**Sent by Electronic Mail****Regional Air Division Directors**

Linda Murphy, Region I
Kathy Callahan, Region II
Judy Katz, Region III
Winston Smith, Region IV
David Kee, Region V
Allyn Davis, Region VI
William Spratlin, Region VII
Kerrigan Clough, Region VIII
David Howekamp, Region IX
Anita Frankel, Region X

Regional Air Toxics Contacts

Janet Bowen, Region I
Umesh Dholakia/YueOn Chiu, Region II
Dianne Walker/Alice Chow, Region III
Lee Page, Region IV
Bruce Varner, Region V
Belinda Breidenbach, OECA
Robert Todd/Mark Potts, Region VI
Richard Tripp, Region VII
Victoria Parker-Christensen/Ann-Marie Patrie/Heather
Region VIII
Mae Wang/Nikole Reaksecker, Region IX
Doug Hardesty/Andrea Longhouse, Region X

cc: Mary Nichols
Richard Wilson
Lydia Wegman
Julie Andresen